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## **COMMUNICATING WITH THE DEAD**

Tony Walter

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Humans relate to the dead in a wide variety of ways, which may or may not entail an experience of communicating with the dead. Whereas, communication is an inherently social activity, the ways in which communicating with the dead has been socially framed will be addressed first, before going on to look at those cultures which provide no such frame, and finally certain experiences that are seemingly unframed. Throughout, I take the stance of the anthropologist or student of religion who attempts to describe human experience; I neither reduce experiences of communicating with the dead to biological or psychological processes, nor consider whether they could provide evidence of the supernatural.

### **Socially framed communications**

#### **Mutual care**

In many societies, there is a relationship of mutual care between the living and the dead. The dead need the help of the living on their journey to heaven (as in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity) or to the status of ancestor (as in much of East Asia). Catholics, for example, pray to the saints (a particular category of authenticated pious dead) for the souls of those they care for. In Japan, offerings are made to the dead at certain places (the household shrine, and public Shinto shrines) and certain times (the O'Bon festival in mid-August when the dead return to earth). In return, the dead are consulted for guidance, again typically at these times and places. A *shrine* is a place where the living may care for, and be guided by, the dead.

In a number of cultures and religions, distinctions are made between the recent dead and those who have become ancestors, typically after two generations have passed and there are few if any living who personally remember them. Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, for example, supplications are made to the ancestral spirits (the long dead) through the intermediary of the living dead (the recent dead). Ancestorhood usually reflects not personal affection for the deceased, but the continuance beyond the grave of familial authority relations; in Africa, this relation with the ancestor may be more one of fear than of care.

In addition to these family ancestors, there are also the sacred dead legitimated by powerful institutions such as the state (national heroes, the war dead) or the church (saints); communications with these sacred dead are controlled by the relevant institution. In Japan, those who have died in war for their country attain the status of divinities, and so care between the living and the dead is particularly pronounced in rites performed at the Yasukuni national shrine for the war dead.

#### **Reincarnation within the family**

In a number of African and North American Pacific Coast societies, there is a belief that the spirit and character of a dead person may be transferred to a living child or newborn baby. Among the Shona, a child may be given the name of a living grandparent, and be related to as though she were the grandparent, and after the elder's death the child receives the personal character of the deceased. In such societies, there is a strong sense that the dead can manifest themselves within the living, and by implication take part in the communications of everyday life. In Western countries without this tradition, there is the idea of a child bearing a strong likeness to an older relative, but this is explained in terms of genes; and, as Roland

Barthes has observed, photographs comprise a way in which the dead manifest themselves among the living.

### **Continuing bonds with the dead**

In many societies, the boundary between the living and the dead is relatively permeable, and it is accepted that the living may chat to the dead. This is, for example, normal and even expected behaviour at a Japanese household shrine. Even in communist, secular China, guidance may be sought about business decisions from the ancestors, and in Japan an office building may have its own shrine. This is common in societies where filial piety is strong: the elders are respected and their advice sought in life, and there is no reason why this should cease in death. This both assists the living, and legitimates respect for elders.

### **The unquiet dead**

If the dead are expected to journey steadily away from the material land of the living, whether in the direction of heaven, reincarnation or ancestorhood, this journey may be impeded by a number of factors. The living may cling to them, and the dead may cling to life. They may have died suddenly or violently, or been denied the correct rituals on their deathbed or at the funeral. Others may have no living descendents. These lonely, troubled dead hang around, too close to earth for our comfort or their good. Though ghosts are not always of this troubled nature, seeing or hearing a ghost or vampire can in some societies be taken as evidence that a particular deceased person is not at peace. They require rituals to send them correctly on their way. Exorcising a haunted house, for example, is believed to put a stop to unwanted visits by the dead.

Throughout the twentieth century in England, many who visit mediums or a spiritualist church are concerned about the unquiet state of a deceased relative, such as a child who has died violently. (Spiritualism was very popular after the First World War). The message received from the other side in spiritualist churches in England today is typically 'He's okay, he loves you, and wants you to get on with your life.'

### **The banned dead**

The Judaeo-Christian tradition has banned the use of mediums to contact the dead. Judaism memorialises the dead, but discourages active communication with them. For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, the saints may be contacted through the prayers of the church, while in Protestantism all contact with the dead is wrong - though some individual Christians on occasion quietly consult mediums. Other belief systems, such as secular materialism, state that it is impossible for the living and the dead to communicate with each other, since the dead no longer exist. Hence the historically Protestant, now largely secular, societies of N.W. Europe and, to an extent, N. America, have little space for communication with the dead.

If contact with the dead is impossible, or wrong, then people are left largely with memory. This is all there is, since the dead cannot be cared for, feared, or prayed to. So in the West there are war memorials, where the living remember those who sacrificed their lives, contrasting with Japan which has shrines where the living can care for the war dead and be guided by them.

Even in societies which ban contact with the dead, people may have some of the experiences discussed in earlier sections. They may pursue the experience, but in private; it is not socially validated. A mourner may talk to a deceased husband, parent or child, but privately, or at the graveside when there are few people around. Caring

for the grave, by keeping it clean and the flowers fresh, may be experienced as a way of continuing to care for the person.

In Anglo-American society, which largely bans the dead, subcultures have developed which feature communications with the dead, reacting against the official ban. Ghost stories, haunted houses, jangling skeletons and gothic misty churchyards have been part of English and American literary and popular culture since the late seventeenth century, continued today in British goth subculture and in the Hollywood horror movie. All these are largely absent in Catholic Mediterranean Europe, or, if present, are recognised as Anglo imports.

Modern western societies, especially the USA, have, however, instituted one particular way in which the dead leave powerful messages for the living, namely philanthropy. Philanthropists leave exceptionally clear instructions for how their post-mortem fortunes are to fund good causes, and would-be recipients must listen very carefully to the deceased's conditions if they are to be successful in their bids for funds.

Since the 1990s, secular psychological theories of grief allow that mourners may continue various kinds of bonds with the dead. This opens up a space in which even secular materialists and devout Protestants can accept relationships, if not actual communication, with the dead. Without formal religious legitimation, however, these continuing bonds are seen as just a psychological need.

### **Other communications**

Other communications are highly individual, and less obviously either socially framed or culturally banned. They are also much more closely tied to dying and mourning.

*Nearing death awareness* is when someone on their deathbed reports an experience that includes a deceased family member, who may appear to be welcoming them. In Britain, such experiences are rarely reported to doctors, more often to nurses or family carers; in Ireland, such experiences are well known and part of folk culture.

*Near-death experiences* (NDEs) occur when someone is clinically dead, often because of a sudden cardiac arrest, and include a range of experiences, one of which is a sense of going down a tunnel at the end of which is an image of light, often interpreted as an angel or a divinity. The figure is rarely, however, interpreted as a known deceased, and therefore cannot properly be counted as a communication with the dead.

*The sense of presence* is the perception, through sight, sound or smell, of a deceased loved one. It comes unbidden, and is therefore different from employing a medium to contact the dead. It may occur months, years or decades after the death. Like the near-death experience, it has been well-documented over the past forty years. Whereas earlier researchers found that informants often said they had not previously mentioned the experience to anyone, this is now not the case; the sense of presence seems to be gaining a measure of legitimacy.

### **Explanations**

There are two kinds of popular literature about nearing death awareness, NDEs and the sense of presence. On the one hand, rationalists attempt to explain them in terms of psychology or biology. Thus the sense of presence is seen as a part of the grief process, or the NDE is explained in terms of brain chemistry. On the other hand, supernaturalists use such experiences as evidence of God or the supernatural.

Both rationalists and supernaturalists are entitled to their views, but a social science approach is different. Since every human experience undeniably has a biological component, there is clear merit in exploring the biochemistry of unusual experiences; and throughout history, unusual experiences have shaped religious beliefs. But to reduce experience to biology, or to see it as proof of the supernatural, are both acts of faith. Alternatively, communications with the dead can be seen as, in the broadest sense, religious experiences. These experiences the social scientist may document, both from the inside by gathering first-hand narratives and by participant observation, and from the outside by documenting the legitimization, pathologising, and cultural history of such experiences.

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See also: Ancestor Veneration; Days of the Dead; Memorials, War; Near-Death Experiences; Shinto Beliefs and Traditions; Spiritualist Movement.

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